

**Testimony in support of DPH funding for gun violence prevention
Appropriations Committee Hearing, February 24, 2022, 2:00 p.m.**

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, ranking members Miner and France and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

Our names are Roye Anastasio-Bourke and Elizabeth Keenan and we live in New Haven, CT. We are submitting joint testimony in support of funding the \$3.6 million allocation to the Department of Public Health (DPH) for community violence prevention included in Governor's Bill **5037**.

We are Co-chairs of **CONNECT's Do Not Stand Idly By** anti-gun violence team, which represents more than 30,000 CT citizens from a wide variety of faith-based congregations in Fairfield and New Haven counties (Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut; www.weconnect.org). We are working with other partners on a market-based strategy for safe gun technology. Although progress is being made, the speed is woefully insufficient to respond to the continued violence taking place across Connecticut.

Between January 2019 and April 2021, firearms were purchased by 7.5 million Americans, many of whom were first-time buyers. In the first six days of January 2022, more than 600 Americans were killed by gunfire. Right here in Connecticut, someone is murdered with a gun every three days. Most alarmingly, more and more children are becoming both victims and perpetrators of gun violence. That is why we are testifying in support of the \$3.6 million included in the Governor's budget adjustment bill so that the Department of Public Health can adequately fund gun violence prevention programs.

While Connecticut has some very effective gun laws, solutions need to go beyond strong gun laws and law enforcement, to de-escalate conflict and break cycles of violence that too often involve guns. The governor's proposal is a good start, and we urge the legislature to strengthen it by addressing some of the root issues that fuel gun violence, including financial insecurity, lack of economic opportunities in under-resourced communities, and racial inequities within housing, education, and healthcare.

Education inequities are evident in a personal experience: I (Roye) am most concerned about the kids and young adults for whom gun violence is a sad but constant presence. My cousin, a dedicated teacher in a Connecticut city, is constantly worried about her students, who are not even teenagers. One young man just 12 years old is known as one of the school's most serious "trouble makers." He has already been arrested for armed robbery, his house has been pummeled with bullets in drive-by shootings and he is a known gang member whose life has been threatened by another gang. Students came to my cousin to warn her and to share their fear of being anywhere near this boy. "Can you please send him to another school?" they plead. "They will shoot him, they will come and shoot him," they say, as much to protect her as themselves. According to my cousin, the school's hands are tied, other than to remain vigilant. It costs too much to send him to any alternative learning institution and the school would be responsible for paying.

I (Elizabeth) am most concerned about the ways that gun violence perpetuates structural racial inequities as fear fuels a limited focus on surveillance and punishment of "known offenders" while

significantly underfunding the root issues of gun violence identified above that could have potentially prevented the troubled youth from needing to engage in robbery. This has long term costs for children and families as well as the State. Research notes that exposure to violence during childhood negatively impacts brain development. These adverse childhood experiences are also linked to lifelong consequences including chronic health problems, mental illness, substance abuse, increased likelihood of criminal behavior, forming healthy relationships and having stable employment. And we know that Black and Latinx children are disproportionately and routinely exposed to gun violence—they witness shootings, hear gunshots, and know friends, relatives and family members who have been shot or killed. These children don't feel safe in their streets, in their schools or even in their own homes. We can and MUST do something about this shameful scourge.

Because of these personal concerns that reverberate to structural inequities, we urge the legislature to:

- **Allocate funding for community-based prevention and intervention programs that have proven track records of reducing gun violence.** Such evidence-based programs aimed at individuals at high risk of perpetrating or being victims of gun violence are demonstrated to reduce shootings and killings in high-violence communities. If the state can afford more than \$300 million in tax cuts, as proposed by the Governor, it can afford to invest more than \$3.6 million (spread over two years) to make our citizens safer.
- Ensure there is dedicated staff in the Department of Public Health Office of Injury Prevention to support the effort.
- Create a **State Office of Gun Violence Prevention to deliver a coordinated response.** This office would have the resources to allocate funding for community- and evidence-based interventions that could go a long way in intercepting violence before it erupts. Not only could we save lives, but we could save money as well. *Everytown* and the *Giffords Law Center* have estimated that gun violence costs Connecticut taxpayers between \$60 and \$90 million annually, and carries a yearly societal cost of up to \$1.2 billion.

Where we spend our money says everything about our priorities. Let's put our resources where they can make a difference. After all, these children are our future and they deserve at the very least to be safe in their schools so they learn and develop and grow into the productive citizens we need.

Sincerely,

Roye Anastasio-Bourke and Elizabeth Keenan

Co-Chairs, CONECT Do Not Stand Idly By Anti-Gun Violence Team

New Haven, CT